

FROM SATAN'S PLAYGROUND TO CHRIST

The Testimony of an Alcoholic

Eamon O'Dwyer tells his own Story

INTRODUCTION

My name is Eamon! I was an alcoholic, and for a period of several years I saw no hope for the future. My relatives, friends and neighbours believed I was a lost cause, and were convinced that I would end up on 'Skid Row.' The drink eventually got such a grip on my life that I ended up in the Alcoholic Unit of an Institution. However, God has been merciful to me and has completely transformed my life. I would like to tell you how this happened.

SCHOOL DAYS

My parents were religious, and faithfully practised the family traditions that had been handed down from generation to generation. They had their ten children baptised as infants into membership of the Roman Catholic Church. My school days began at the Presentation Convent in Thurles, where the nuns educated me. I was not the best behaved boy in the class so it is not surprising that some of the teachers were not too happy with me. The nuns had the task of preparing us for our First Confession.

When I was seven years old I received my First Communion. This was always a great occasion for both the children and their parents. My parents had dressed me up in a new suit for this special event. After the communion mass we were invited to a party, which had been organised by the nuns. However, as far as I was concerned the highlight of the day was the fact that I got a lot of money, and also a number presents, from relatives and friends of our family.

My education, including religious instruction, continued when I moved from the Presentation Convent to the Christian Brothers' Primary School. When I was twelve years old I received the Sacrament of Confirmation. This would make me a strong and perfect Christian, empower me to live a holy life and enable me to overcome temptation. Or so I was told!

MY FIRST TASTE OF ALCOHOL

Some time later I enrolled as a student in the Christian Brothers' Secondary School. I was still a pupil at this school when I got my first taste of alcoholic drink. Some of my school mates and I got hooked on liquor at an early age. In fact two of us became alcoholics. When I left school my drinking became heavier. At that time I was very interested in sport, especially swimming and badminton. I joined a badminton team, but they could not depend upon me being available whenever I was needed for an important game. Sometimes I had to be coaxed out of the pub to play in a match. Eventually I decided that badminton was interfering with my drinking, so it had to go.

IN THE SCRUM

A friend persuaded me to join the local rugby team, and for the next seventeen years I was heavily involved in that sport. Shortly after joining the team I was introduced to the social side of rugby. I would like to point out that I am not being critical of rugby or of anybody who plays the game. I just want to say that the social side of rugby affected me personally, for it involved a lot of heavy drinking. I drank before and after training. I also had to have a few drinks before each game, to calm the nerves and boost the courage. The liquid adrenalin stimulator was especially necessary if the opposing team included a panel of hard chaws. I also drank after each game. If we won, I drank. If we lost, I drank. Regardless of the outcome of the match, I either celebrated or consoled myself with a drink. Slowly but surely the alcohol continued to gain more control over my life.

UNDER PRESSURE

I was greatly shocked and saddened the day one of my boozing partners committed suicide. He had been married to a lovely girl and they had two children. His business was booming and he had no financial problems. He seemed to have everything going for him. However, one day he just snapped. He picked up his shotgun and in an instant went out into eternity.

Many alcoholics could tell you of times when the pressure gets so great that suicide seems to be the only way out. On more than one occasion I also felt like taking my own life. At one stage I decided to drive my car into a wall, but I just did not have the courage to do it. Some alcoholics will talk openly about their thoughts of suicide. Others never talk about it, but then, to the dismay of those who know them, they suddenly take their own lives. Alcohol can cause such despair in a person that they feel there is no other way out of their misery. However, I can sincerely say to anyone who is feeling down and out or miserable, that there is a way out. I know this from experience. How I thank God for restraining me when I felt suicidal. I discovered, as I read the Scriptures, that it is wrong to take your own life.

Friend, you may feel like you have come to the end of your tether? Maybe you can see no light at the end of the tunnel? But the good news is that there is hope for you. You can call out to the Lord Jesus Christ for help right now. He says in the Scriptures, **'Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends'**.¹ Jesus is standing at the door of your life. He is knocking, and He wants you to invite Him in. He is able to deliver you from your addiction, misery, depression and anxiety. But He can do far more than this! He can save you from an eternity of suffering in the fires of Hell. We read in the Scriptures that **'He is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf'**.²

SHOCKED BY THE TRUTH

In 1973 I got a job with the Erin Foods Company. For a period of eight years I worked as a helper on the trucks, delivering products to various parts of the country. Sometimes this involved staying out overnight. That suited me, for I had more freedom to drink whenever I was away from home. My father also worked in another branch of the same Company, but his wages were not as good as mine. However, most of the money I earned was spent on alcohol, as my addiction grew progressively worse.

I eventually got tired of all the travelling and moved in to the factory, where I was employed as a forklift driver. I also worked as a machine operator on the first floor of the factory. While I was working in this area I came into contact with Dick. I had known him for some time, and knew he enjoyed life. He had been involved in the music business and had played in a band. However, after working alongside him for a few weeks I noticed that he was a changed man. He was now talking about God. He was telling us that Jesus Christ had paid the penalty for our sins when He died on the cross. He told us that through faith in Jesus Christ we could be saved. Dick could back up everything he said by pointing us to the Scriptures. He carried with him a little book with a red cover. On it were written the words, 'New Testament'. At that time I did not know what a New Testament was. I was in complete ignorance concerning the Scriptures. I did not know that the Bible contains sixty six books and consists of an Old and New Testament.

It saddens me to think that even today, here in Ireland, there are thousands of people who are still in ignorance concerning the Scriptures. Many have never even heard the Gospel. A lot of people are unaware of the fact that the Gospel is **'the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile'**.³ Dick showed us in his New Testament that Christ willingly went to Calvary on our behalf and took our place by becoming our substitute and sin bearer. As Jesus suffered and died upon the cross He paid in full the penalty for the guilt of our sins. He laid down His life as a 'Once-For-All' sacrifice for sin. According to the Scriptures, the only way a person can be saved is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ: **'God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it'**.⁴

This was quite a shock to my system. However, I was not prepared to put aside the traditions and teachings that had been passed on to me by my parents and teachers. These teachings and traditions were very important to me, so I decided to oppose Dick and the message he was proclaiming. I also encouraged some of my colleagues in the factory to make life difficult for him. We tormented him as much as we could. We

often hid his New Testament, abused him verbally and really blackguarded him. I nicknamed him 'The Bishop'.

NO BACKDOORS

One day I was so busy on my machine that I could not leave it. I was watching some of my friends as they tried to torment Dick. They were verbally abusing him and trying to make him angry. They tried everything to upset him, but he just kept smiling through it all. This really bugged me. It was then that I finally realised that this man had something different. Whatever it was, we could not break it, no matter how hard we tried. There and then I decided to ask my friend, Jimmy, if he would accompany me to one of Dick's meetings, which were held in his home on Tuesday and Friday nights and also on Sunday mornings. Jimmy was one of those people who took great delight in making life difficult for Dick, so we decided we would go to the meeting just to have a good laugh. We were not sure if we would be allowed to attend the meeting, but when we asked Dick he assured us that we would be made very welcome.

On the following Tuesday night we arrived outside Dick's home. We could hear the singing coming from the room in which the meeting was being held. We just burst out laughing. At one stage we had to bite our jumpers in case our laughter could be heard above the singing. Even when we walked into the room we were laughing loudly. However, the people who were at the meeting did not seem to mind. They just continued with what they were doing. I was amazed as I listened to them praying. Their prayers were so meaningful and personal. They seemed to be praying to someone with whom they had a personal relationship.

The smiles soon came off our faces when Dick brought a message from the Scriptures. The Gospel message he shared that night was not watered down. It went straight to the heart. As I listened it became very clear that there are no back doors into Heaven. I learned at that meeting that Jesus said, **"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."**⁵ I had been hoping to get into Heaven through one of the back doors. I had hoped to gain entry through my own good works and membership of the Church. However, the message of the Scriptures was very clear that night: SALVATION IS BY FAITH ALONE IN CHRIST ALONE.

God's Word really penetrated. I was being confronted with the truth, and it hurt. **'For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires'**.⁶ As the Word of God was being proclaimed my heart was touched and I was really challenged. It hurt me when I realised what Jesus had to do in order to save sinners like me. My laughter nearly turned to tears, but I was too proud to let the tears flow. I knew I needed to respond to God's love for me, but I was not prepared to give up the traditions I had grown up with. I was not willing to give up my carefree lifestyle, and I was especially determined that I would not give up the drink. It meant too much to me.

SITTING ON THE FENCE

We got an invitation to come to other meetings, and I attended a number of them. At the meetings I heard the way of salvation expounded very clearly. I learned of why the Lord Jesus Christ had suffered and died on the cross. I was amazed when I discovered that He loved me so much that He willingly became my substitute and sin bearer. On the cross He paid in full the penalty for the guilt of my sins. In fact He purchased eternal redemption for all who will repent of their sins and put their faith in Him. I also discovered that there is only one mediator in Heaven. **'For, there is one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus'**.⁷

The more I heard God's Word proclaimed, the more convinced I became of what I should do. I knew the step I had to take. However, for many years I just sat on the fence. I was happy enough to have one foot in the world and the other in Christianity. At one stage I even professed to have put my faith in Jesus, but deep down in my heart I knew I was far away from God.

The Lord was calling me to follow Him, but I did not want to know. I was just like the prophet Jonah. When God called him he ran in the opposite direction. I was certainly running away from God. He continued to patiently call me, but I resisted. I even argued with God, and told Him that I was not prepared to follow Him. I was not prepared to give up my drinking or to change my lifestyle. I was quite happy to have a religious front and to wear a mask of respectability. I felt I could live a double life. I could look like a Christian, but live like a

pagan. I can say to anybody who is in a similar position today that sitting on the fence will just make you miserable. You will feel torn asunder, tormented and confused. That is just how I felt.

FIREWATER

My drinking continued to get heavier. It finally got to the stage where I was having blackouts. I did not realise this and thought I was just becoming forgetful. Eventually I began to notice that something was wrong. When people asked if I enjoyed being in a particular place or doing a particular thing, I did not know what they were talking about. They must have known by the blank expression on my face that I was not in touch with reality. I became so embarrassed by this that I began to lie to people. I pretended to remember where I had been and what I had done. I was being very badly affected by the drink at this stage. I could understand why the Red Indians referred to alcohol as Firewater. They also called it the Spirit. As far as I am concerned, alcohol is an evil spirit. It is used by the Devil to destroy individuals, families, and even whole communities.

The glitter and tinsel setting of television advertisements for alcoholic drink deceived me. I have often said that the liquor reminds me of a rose garden. The rose looks beautiful, but when you touch it you soon discover there are also thorns, and they sting. This is how it was with the booze. When I touched it I got badly stung. I realised my health was beginning to be affected, but I was still craving for the very thing that was destroying me. Unknown to myself I had now entered what is technically known as the chronic stage of alcoholism.

A DOG IN THE CORNER

When I met Bernie she did not realise that my addiction to alcohol was so serious. While we were dating I took great care to ensure that I was never badly intoxicated when I was in her company. However, shortly after our marriage she found herself in the difficult position of trying to live with someone who seemed to be a completely different person to the man she had dated, fallen in love with and married. She was very patient and made every effort to help me to overcome my addiction, but my craving for alcohol continued to increase.

We have three lovely children. Barbara, our oldest girl, is handicapped. Shortly after being born she was diagnosed as having Cerebral Palsy. Yvonne is our second daughter. Our son's name is Matthew. Barbara will never know that her father was an alcoholic. Matthew was very young at that time, and never saw me drunk. However, Yvonne did see a lot of what went on. She often pleaded with me when I wanted to go out drinking, and asked me if I would stay at home. Bernie and Yvonne felt so heartbroken and helpless as they watched me slowly destroying myself, but nothing would stop me. If I wanted alcohol I had to have it. When I did not have the money for drink I was not a very nice person to be with. I was like a dog in the corner. Nobody could come near me. It breaks my heart now when I think of how much I hurt my dear wife and children.

My drinking became so heavy that I could no longer hold down my job in Erin Foods. When I got my redundancy money I gave my family what I considered to be a reasonable portion, but kept a far larger amount for myself. I kept drinking day after day until every penny was gone. The alcohol eventually began to take its toll on my body. My health broke down and I was diagnosed as having Burgess' Disease. This is a blood disorder. In my case it was caused by excessive alcohol.

ON SKID ROW

One evening I finally realised I was heading for 'Skid Row.' I had been in the pub since early that morning, and though I was very intoxicated, I got into my car and drove to Dick and Mary's home. I was drunk, crying and sick. I was in a terrible state and felt all broken up inside. Dick and Mary were glad to see me. They talked to me for a long time and counseled me. They offered to help me get my life in order. Acting on their advice I agreed that Dick should take me to get a letter from my doctor stating I was in urgent need of Detoxification. Dick then took me to an Institution, where I was admitted to the Drying Out unit. He stayed with me until I was settled in, and then went to my home and explained the situation to my wife and family. They were very relieved to hear that I was finally willing to admit that I had a problem. The fact that I was prepared to accept help to overcome my addiction was a real encouragement to them.

I spent three weeks in that Institution. After I had been dried out it was suggested that I should spend some time in an Institution that ran a recovery programme for alcoholics. I agreed to this, and was transferred to a unit in County Waterford. Not one of my drinking partners came to visit me during my stay in that unit. None of them even sent me a Get Well card. They had no interest in me now because I could not buy them a few

drinks. While I had money in my pocket and was buying rounds for the boys I was a very popular fellow, but now they just did not want to know me. This taught me a very important lesson: as far as a boozier is concerned, alcohol is far more important than people.

JUST A SOCIAL DRINK

At this stage I was in very bad shape. I was a broken man, suffering from the shakes. I had entered a condition known to alcoholics as 'The Rats'. Having been without a drink for over three weeks I was now having severe withdrawal symptoms. It felt as if I was having a heavy bout of 'flu twenty times each day. My heart was palpitating and I was convinced I could see things flickering up before my eyes. I could also hear voices in my head. They were saying, 'Everyone is laughing at you. You are foolish to be going through this torture. Go back home and have a few drinks. Then you will feel fine'.

During the time I spent in that unit my eyes were really opened to the power and evil of alcohol. I saw a man who had to be restrained in a strait jacket in case he might kill himself or someone else. One of the men in my ward was dying of Cirrhosis of the liver. The consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol had caused this condition. He was only forty years of age. On his death-bed he was crying out for a drink, the very thing that was literally killing him. These were men whose introduction to alcohol began with a social drink. However, that social drink gradually led to excessive drunkenness. Eventually it developed into soul-destroying alcoholism.

It is not surprising that God says in His Word, 'Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God'.⁸ According to the Scriptures no drunkard will enter Heaven. However, God is willing to save and to change drunkards. I know this is true, for I was a drunkard, steeped in sin. How I thank God that He is interested in saving and delivering the drunkard.

One of the patients in my ward was a man named Martin. He was suffering from deep depression because his wife had left him. One morning he tried to hang himself in the hospital bathroom. Throughout the remainder of the day he refused to talk to anybody or to eat any food. Dick and his father, Denis, came to visit me that evening. Both of them had a long talk with Martin. He responded, and from then on he began to improve. I was delighted to hear that after he was discharged from the hospital Martin attended a Gospel meeting in Waterford Baptist Church. Michael Grant, the Pastor of that Church, had visited me in the Institution and had helped me a lot.

NO CONDEMNATION

As the weeks went by my mind began to clear. I was able to remember a lot of what I had heard concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the Scripture verses I remembered says, 'For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life'.⁹ However, I wondered if God could love me? I knew I was a filthy sinner and did not deserve God's mercy. I felt that my sin was so black that God could not forgive me. I had hurt a lot of people, and had offended God. How could I be forgiven? Thankfully, God brought back to my mind a passage of Scripture I had heard in the past. It says, 'So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus'.¹⁰ I remembered hearing it explained that all the condemnation for my sins was placed on the shoulders of the Lord Jesus Christ as He hung upon the cross at Calvary. As He suffered and died as my substitute and sin bearer He paid in full the penalty for the guilt of all my sins. I finally realised that because Jesus Christ had already borne the punishment for my sins I could be forgiven. In fact I could be forgiven immediately.

I got down on my knees in the privacy of my room in that Institution in Waterford and repented of my sins. I then asked God to forgive me, to save me and to come into my life and change me. I asked Him to make me the person He wanted me to be. This was no half-hearted request. It was a cry from the very depths of my soul. God answered my cry and came into my life that night. Many years previously I had fallen in the mud and the mire of sin, and had continued to sink deeper every day. In fact I had sunk so low that it seemed there was nothing left above the mire but my hand. However, when I called out to God for help He clasped that hand and pulled me up out of the pit of sin. Like the Psalmist I could now say, 'I waited patiently for the LORD to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along'.¹¹

BACK HOME

Before I came home from that Institution I was a changed man. God had changed me. He had completely taken away the desire for alcohol, and had placed within my heart a determination to live for Him in such a way that glory would be brought to His Name. Back home in Thurles I regularly attended the meetings in the Evangelical Church, and within twelve months I was received into membership. Some time later I worked alongside my good friends, Brian, Cathy and David Harvey, who held children's meetings in Thurles and Roscrea. These 5-Day Clubs consisted of Bible stories, quizzes, memory verses and choruses, and were well attended by many of the local children.

Bernie and I then decided to hold children's meetings in our home on Saturdays. We visited our neighbours and asked if they would allow their children to attend our Good News Club. We asked Dick and Mary and also their daughter, Rebecca, to help us lead the meetings. One of the lessons we covered with the children was entitled Pilgrim's Progress. The youngsters listened very attentively as they learned of people who find themselves in the Valley of Decision. These are people who realise that if they are ever to be saved they need to respond positively to Christ's invitation. **'Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."**¹² Friend, are you in the Valley of Decision today? What will your decision be? How will you respond to Christ's invitation? Will you come to Him and receive the gift of eternal life, or will you ignore His invitation and remain in your sin? Will He have to say to you, **"Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life."**¹³ **I called you so often, but you wouldn't come. I reached out to you, but you paid no attention."**¹⁴

WASTED YEARS RESTORED

Some time ago I listened to a song called 'Wasted Years'. The words of this song seem to describe the part of my life that was completely wasted on drink. However, I thank God that He has given me a new start. **'This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!'**¹⁵ God, in His grace and mercy, has picked up the pieces of my shattered life and restored me.

INVITATION

Dear Friend, some years ago many people believed I was a lost cause. But God had not given up on me. He was interested in me, and I know He is also interested in you. He loved me when nobody else did. And He loves you, too. Jesus has already proved how much He loves you by willingly dying on the cross as your substitute. Will you come to Him today? Acknowledging the fact that you are a sinner, come to Him in sincere repentance. Right now, just where you are, ask Him to forgive you and to save you. If you ask Him to come into your life as Saviour and Lord, and to change you, HE WILL!

"Come now, let's settle this," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool."¹⁶ **For God says, "At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you. Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation'."**¹⁷ **For "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."**¹⁸

Friend, it is my heart's desire and prayer to God that TODAY you will put your life in the hands of Jesus, who said, **"The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life."**¹⁹

I have written this little booklet to remind you who are still struggling with alcohol addiction that there is no need to despair. There is a God of love and compassion who is willing and able to save your soul and to deliver you from your misery.

Eamon O'Dwyer

Scripture References

- 1:** Revelation Ch.3 v 20
- 2:** Hebrews Ch.7 v25
- 3:** Romans Ch.1 v 16
- 4:** Ephesians Ch.2 vs 8, 9
- 5:** John Ch.14 v 6
- 6:** Hebrews Ch.4 v 12
- 7:** 1Timothy Ch.2 v 5
- 8:** 1Corinthians Ch.6 vs 9, 10,11
- 9:** John Ch.3 v 16
- 10:** Romans Ch.8 v 1
- 11:** Psalm 40 vs 1, 2
- 12:** Matthew Ch.11 v 28
- 13:** John Ch.5 v 40
- 14:** Proverbs Ch.1 v 24
- 15:** 2 Corinthians Ch.5 v 17
- 16:** Isaiah Ch.1 v 18
- 17:** 2 Corinthians Ch.6 v 2
- 18:** Romans Ch.10 v 13
- 19:** John Ch.10 v 10